Pearl Harbor Oral History Collection

Vance Leneave
December 2, 1986

Interview conducted by Mark Frito
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Pearl Harbor Oral History Collection
Pearl Harbor National Memorial
1 Arizona Memorial Place
Honolulu, HI 96818
perl_museum_collections@nps.gov

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Mark Frito: Okay, I have to read this just to log it in. The following interview of Vance Leneave was conducted on December 2, 1986 in Honolulu at about 7:45 in the evening. Mr. Leneave lives in Cadiz, Kentucky. Interviewer is Mark Frito, and also present in the room is Mark Tanaka Sanders of the National Park Service. Okay, now that we got that out of the way. Let me start off by asking you what your name is and what your hometown was back in 1941.

Vance Leneave: Vance Leneave, Golden Pond, Kentucky.

Mark Frito: What branch of the service were you in and what was your rank?

Vance Leneave: Navy, and I was a Metalsmith, Second Class.

Mark Frito: When did you come to Hawaii?

Vance Leneave: 1940. June of 1940.

Mark Frito: And where were you assigned?

Vance Leneave: Well, I was aboard ship at that time.

Mark Frito: And the name of the ship?

Vance Leneave: Medusa. USS Medusa.

Mark Frito: What kind of a ship was that?

Vance Leneave: A repair ship.

Mark Frito: Let me take you to the morning of the attack. Before the attack. That morning. What were you doing?

Vance Leneave: I was sleeping. Well actually, I was awake, but we were still in our cots. We slept in our shop. It was a pipe copper shop, about one deck above the main deck, and we were all sleeping in, which we normally did on Sunday. And one of the boys heard the planes, and stepped out on deck, and recognized the planes as Japanese, and of course we automatically started going to our battle stations.

Mark Frito: Had you heard anything at this point besides the planes? No bombs dropping?

Vance Leneave: Not a thing.

Mark Frito: What happened then? You went up above deck, on deck.

Vance Leneave: Well, we grabbed our clothing and headed for our battle stations. And in my case, it was down in the foundry, which was down in the hold.

Mark Frito: Below deck.

Vance Leneave: Below decks. About I guess four decks below where we were.

Mark Frito: Did you go there?

Vance Leneave: I went there, and then they asked for volunteers to go to the powder magazine, and I thought anything was better than being in that hold in the foundry, four decks down. Forgot about the fact that the powder magazine was the most dangerous spot on the ship. (Laughs)

Mark Frito: Before you went to your battle station, you were on the deck. What did you see?

Vance Leneave: I didn't actually take time to look for anything at that time, but uh.

Mark Frito: Did you see any attacking airplanes at that time?

Vance Leneave: I didn't because we just headed out as fast as we could down below decks.

Mark Frito: So you went to your battle station, but then volunteered to go to the powder room, er, powder magazine, excuse me?

Vance Leneave: Uh-huh.

Mark Frito: What happened next?

Vance Leneave: Well, we were loading clips for 30-caliber machine guns, and I was taking the clips to the top deck. And that's the only way I got to see any action at all and see any planes. And I would kill a little time while I was up there, look around to see what was going on.

Mark Frito: What did you see going on?

Vance Leneave: Well, I just saw planes coming in, and the bombs dropping. Of course, everybody, all the ships by that time within a few minutes were getting some guns in action, you know. Of course I didn't spend a lot of time up there. I was running back and forth, you know.

Mark Frito: Did you see any bombs or torpedoes hit?

Vance Leneave: No, I didn't.

Mark Frito: What were the crewmembers on the Medusa doing on deck? The gunners. They were firing what kind of weapons?

Vance Leneave: Well, they even broke out the Browning automatic rifles, and some of them were on deck trying to use those. I don't think they had much luck with something like that. But any way they were making an effort.

Mark Frito: Did you see any of the attacking airplanes get hit?

Vance Leneave: No, I didn't.

Mark Frito: These planes, I take it, were rather low.

Vance Leneave: Yes.

Mark Frito: Were you able to see any of the pilots aboard these planes?

Vance Leneave: No, I didn't see any of them. Didn't really take that much time to look, you know.

Mark Frito: So during the heat of battle, you were shuttling back and forth between the powder magazine and the decks carrying ammo.

Vance Leneave: Right.

Mark Frito: What happened next? What happened after that?

Vance Leneave: Well, of course, we heard a loud speaker from the Curtiss. It was a seaplane tender, and they were tied up to a buoy just a short distance from us. Told us there was a two-man sub between us. And we tried to get our gun crew, I found out later the powder hoist broke down on their five-inch gun, surface gun. And they turned a three-inch anti-

aircraft gun down between the two ships, and put a hole in his conning tower.

Mark Frito: Between the Medusa and the Curtiss.

Vance Leneave: And the Curtiss. And then they signaled the destroyer, I don't remember, I believe it was the Shaw, I'm not sure.

Mark Frito: The Monaghan? Does that ring a bell?

Vance Leneave: It could have been the Monaghan, I'm not sure. But they came over and picked him up and dropped a depth charge on him.

Mark Frito: I'm sorry. When you say picked him up, meaning sighted him?

Vance Leneave: Right.

Mark Frito: Did you see this destroyer ram this submarine?

Vance Leneave: No, I didn't.

Mark Frito: Apparently it did, but you not see it.

Vance Leneave: No, huh-uh.

Mark Frito: So, at one point you must have stopped shuttling ammo up to the deck. What happened next?

Vance Leneave: Well, I don't remember that there was much going on except that, you know, it was just, ah.

Mark Frito: When you were up on deck, when you would bring ammo up, did you have occasion to look around the harbor to see what it looked like?

Vance Leneave: I really didn't notice. Of course I saw smoke and all that, but, you know, in a situation like that, maybe you don't see what you would liked to have seen later on, you know, if you think about it. I wish I had watched the whole action and could have seen the bombs hit the ships, but you don't take time to do that, you know.

Mark Frito: Was there a lot of confusion?

Vance Leneave: Well, not really. On our ship I don't think there was. Everybody went to their battle station and started doing

what you would ordinarily do. I didn't see a lot of confusion at all. Of course, on other people's ships, I'm not sure about.

Mark Frito: What was going through your mind while all of this was happening? You are doing your job.

Vance Leneave: The first thing went through my mind while I was in that hold was how in the world am I going to get out of here if we take a bomb. Because a ship like that, one bomb would have put us to the bottom. Which the Vestal, was another repair ship, and it did take a bomb and went down.

Mark Frito: That was right next to the Arizona.

Vance Leneave: Uh-huh.

Mark Frito: So it's going through your mind.

Vance Leneave: And I thought now, maybe this cupola, you know, a cupola is in a foundry. They use a cupola for the smoke, the fire to go out when they are melting metal. And it's like a tall chimney, about three feet in diameter. And I thought well, maybe we can get out that way, you know. And I was kind of glad when they said come down, come up to the powder magazine and help us load clips.

Mark Frito: How long did you stay on the Medusa that day? Did you stay on it all day?

Vance Leneave: Oh yes, yes, we didn't leave it.

Mark Frito: What's the most vivid memory you have of the attack?

Vance Leneave: The most vivid memory is this boy going on deck and recognizing those planes and yelling, and he said a couple of curse words, and he says it's the Japs. And that's the first thing that I think of when I think of the attack. I don't know how he recognized them, because a lot of people said they saw the planes coming over, yet they didn't recognize those planes as Japanese. And he did immediately.

Mark Frito: When you looked up, did you recognize them?

Vance Leneave: Well, I don't think I would have, really.

Mark Frito: What happened the rest of the day, for you?

Vance Leneave: Well, we stayed at battle stations, and of course there was a lull from the first wave to the second. And we stayed at battle stations for, I guess until about dusk, if I remember correctly. I'm not sure about that. But then it was just getting dark, and when some of our planes came over, and I think every ship in the harbor opened up on them, and shot down two of our own planes.

Mark Frito: Did you see that?

Vance Leneave: The only thing I saw was the gunfire. I didn't see the planes.

Mark Frito: Can you think of any incident that happened during the course of the battle that you might share with us? Any interesting little.

Vance Leneave: Not really.

Mark Frito: What was it like here in the days and weeks after the attack? What did you do?

Vance Leneave: Well, we worked. We were a repair ship. We didn't take damage. We had a little machinegun few holes, a little shrapnel. Had one man get a shrapnel in his arm. But we started right in on a seven-day week, and most of us worked twelve hours a day in the repair division doing repair work. We had a part of our work force help cut the hole in the bottom of the Oklahoma.

Mark Frito: You were on that work force?

Vance Leneave: No, I didn't work on that job. But they got out several men and brought them aboard our ship, and most of them stayed and worked part of our crew from then on. And one of them was a shipfitter and he worked with a diving crew out of my shop. I wasn't on the diving crew, but they worked mostly aboard the Oklahoma. But we did repair jobs for a lot of ships.

Mark Frito: When did you realize the magnitude of what had happened that morning?

Vance Leneave: Well, I suppose by the time it was over, everybody -- of course we had radios, the radio was telling you everything that was going on, and of course, we listened to all of that, and you have, really, I guess we knew about as much as

anybody else through the news media, not from what we knew aboard the ship, you know. They didn't tell us a lot about what had happened.

Mark Frito: Did you have an opportunity at some point to see some of the extensive damage along battleship row?

Vance Leneave: Oh, yes.

Mark Frito: When did you see that?

Vance Leneave: Well, every day. Of course, we were in and out and around over at the shipyard. I remember the oil. That was a very clean harbor. We had no mosquitoes, as I remember, from 1940 until that day. And of course, the oil that came out of all the ships that were sunk just covered the harbor. And the oil was probably six inches deep, maybe deeper than that. They brought some kind of yard crab from the coast that picked the oil up out of the water and helped clean it. And I remember our boat crews were picking bodies out of the water. And I didn't work on any of those boat crews, but they would come back and tell us the conditions, and how the oil was all over, you know. And then from that time on, we had to sleep under mosquito netting, sleeping up above deck where the mosquitoes could get to you. We had to put mosquito nettings on our cots, or they were so bad you couldn't sleep.

Mark Frito: What was your reaction when you saw the devastation along battleship row?

Vance Leneave: Well, I don't know. I suppose you had a lot of thoughts, and mainly everybody was mad, of course, naturally. People who are our best, some of our best friends today were our worst enemies then, and there was a lot of anger in everybody at that time.

Mark Frito: I take it that anger then has dissipated over the years.

Vance Leneave: Oh yes, sure.

Mark Frito: Some people still hold animosity towards Japan or the Japanese because of the attack. How about you?

Vance Leneave: Well, I don't think, I don't really think I ever did that much because if you think about it, those fellas were doing what their government told them to do, which is what we would

have done if they told us to do something that wasn't right. And we thought they were wrong, and they thought they were right, I guess. But after it was all over, and right away we could tell that we were not going to be enemies of the Japanese. As far as personal animosity, I've never had that feeling.

Mark Frito: So for example, if there were some Japanese survivors of World War II or the Pearl Harbor attack at this year's reunion or even another year's reunion, you would feel that --

Vance Leneave: We had that happen in San Antonio at a meeting, a national meeting. We had a pilot from, who actually took part in the attack. And a lot of people got his autograph, and he had a little pickup truck sitting there, and he had signs up. In fact I think he asked if he could join our organization. Of course they turned him down, but.

Mark Frito: How did you feel about him?

Vance Leneave: It didn't bother me. In fact I wish I could have talked to him. I went by and spoke to him, but I didn't get the chance to talk to him.

Mark Frito: How long after the attack was it before you left the islands?

Vance Leneave: We went to the South Pacific in May, I believe it was, of '43.

Mark Frito: Aboard the Medusa?

Vance Leneave: Aboard the Medusa, and then I left down there in June.

Mark Frito: And where did you go?

Vance Leneave: I went back to the States and picked up a new ship, a destroyer escort.

Mark Frito: And finished out the war on that ship?

Vance Leneave: Uh-huh. Stayed on the East Coast a while, then came back to the South Pacific.

Mark Frito: What was life like for you while you were in Hawaii after the attack as far as martial law was concerned?

Vance Leneave: Well, the only thing that worried us, we couldn't get a bottle of beer, you know. And finally they opened up a – well, for 4 ½ months, I believe there wasn't a bar open. And I wasn't all that much of a drinker, but I did enjoy a beer, especially if I'd been working hard and hot. Finally we could go to the Marine Barracks there on the base, and then I think it was about 4 ½ months. But during when they had the martial law, one thing I noticed when you would go down the street, anybody, a serviceman or a civilian, if you didn't stop when the flag was being lowered or raised at a school or anything, they would place you under arrest right there. So actually they meant business, you know. And of course it kinda messed up our swimming on Waikiki. They put all that barbed wire out there, you know. That made a little change.

Mark Frito: Do you know how martial law affected the civilian population?

Vance Leneave: I really don't know how they felt about it. I didn't know that many personally, and I suppose, they seemed to be in favor of anything that would keep down an invasion. And they were afraid, of course they did have spies, the Japanese had spies here. And I expect about 99% of them were loyal to the United States as anybody else. But there was a few, you know, that they -- in fact they caught a few, I think, and.

Mark Frito: When you hear or read the words Pearl Harbor or December 7th, what picture flashes in your mind?

Vance Leneave: Well, just the attack, naturally. I'm like everybody else. You can always pinpoint the exact spot, people my age, all of them, can pinpoint the exact spot they were at, even the place they were standing when they heard the news. And I suppose the memory's about the same, except that mine would be different, you know, being.

Mark Frito: One picture more vivid than any other, though, in your mind when I say to you Pearl Harbor?

Vance Leneave: Not really. You know, I mean, no particular incident except when it just all of a sudden it was on us, you know. And we realized what we were in for at that time.

Mark Frito: You played a part in a major event in history.

Vance Leneave: Right.

Mark Frito: Has that affected your life in any way?

Vance Leneave: Well, sure, it has, because being a survivor and at the time, as I told you before, there were eight people from my hometown here. But now I'm the only one in the county, and uh.

Mark Frito: The others have died or moved away?

Vance Leneave: Well, most of them have moved away. I think there is one that has died. And of course, joining this organization, the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, I come in contact with these fellows. We tell the same stories, rehash it, you know, back and forth. Met a lot of good people, and use it a lot of times for an excuse to take a vacation trip. Every five years we come back to Hawaii. I've been back three times, so.

Mark Frito: How do you feel about talking about it?

Vance Leneave: Oh, it doesn't bother me to talk about it. I have no real bad memories as far as the actual attack took place. It's, it's when you think about the people who died, of course, it's bad, but I try not to dwell on that.

[END OF INTERVIEW]